

AirSpace Season 3, Episode 12: Never Surrender

Emily:

We spent the first like 10 minutes of Galaxy Quest watching the movie being like, "Oh my God, that's the guy from the... That's that guy."

Nick:

Which one?

Emily:

The guy who plays Guy.

Nick:

Oh yeah, yeah. Guy, the guy named Guy.

Matt:

Sam Rockwell.

Nick:

Sam Rockwell.

Matt:

Yeah. Sam Rockwell has been in a ton of stuff.

Emily:

Sure. Apparently he's in a ton of stuff.

Nick:

Oh. And they actually based Guy's character on a real person who worked on Star Trek and played multiple roles and never had a name. And that actor's name is Guy.

Emily:

Stop. Is he really?

Nick:

100 percent.

Intro music in and under

Nick:

Welcome to the final episode of AirSpace, season three from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Nick.

Matt:

I'm Matt.

Emily:

And I'm Emily.

Matt:

We started our episodes in 2020 with a series of movie minis and we're ending it kind of the same way, diving into one of the weirdest, funniest and most endearing fan films of all time, Galaxy Quest.

Nick:

The movie came out on December 25th, 1999, and was one of the first widely popular movies that spotlighted science fiction fans as heroes, unlike the documentary Trekkies, which had come out a few years earlier and had sort of derided Star Trek fans as weird and abnormal. Galaxy Quest is much more of a love note to that same fan base.

Emily:

So Galaxy Quest is a love letter to fans. And this episode is our love letter to Galaxy Quest. So program your food synthesizer, sit back and relax with the delicacy from your character's home planet and enjoy.

Music up and out

Nick:

Some housekeeping notes. If you have not seen Galaxy Quest, you really need to get on that right now. We're not going to go so far as to say pause the podcast, but seriously watch Galaxy Quest. It is not on Netflix. It is not on Hulu. It is not on Amazon. It is on HBO Max, and it's very rentable from other platforms. It's rated PG and fun for the whole family. More on that PG rating a little bit later in the show. And if you find yourself, like we did, wanting to know a whole lot more about this movie, there's a great documentary called Never Surrender that was released last year on Amazon Prime for the movie's 20th anniversary.

Movie Clip-Galaxy Quest

Jason Nesmith (Tim Allen):

Never give up, never surrender.

Matt:

So in my mind, it starts with that very famous William Shatner reaction to the fans at one point of, "It's just a TV show. It's not anything that ever really happened." Right? This movie is really about, "Well,

what if somebody made it real? What if it did happen? And how could the fans actually play a part along with their favorite characters in saving a alien civilization from a ruthless alien overlord?"

Emily:

So essentially this movie is about a group of famous actors who all played or starred in a sci-fi television show who were kind of doing the convention circuit, working a lot of small jobs here and there as a result of the fame that they got from doing this television show. But at some point during the movie, they ended up getting commissioned by a group of real aliens who are called Thermians, who need their help in trying to save themselves from this evil reptilian warlord, which is a very, sort of, sci-fi kind of plot. The plot really is these real life actors who are trying to help these real life aliens in what ends up becoming a storyline that is completely reminiscent of one of the scripts from one of their TV shows. And ultimately what makes this such a cool love letter to sci-fi fans is that it's these very recognizable actors who ended up playing these sci-fi kids in the movie who really are the ones who ultimately saved the day.

Matt:

Right. And it's a wonderful plot device that the aliens that have, sort of, come to pick up what they think is the crew of the Protector actually believe, having watched the television show through the signals that have been beamed out into space, that they've been watching historical documents rather than a fictional science fiction television show. And so they actually believe everything that they've seen on the show, which is a lot like what your stereotypical fan at least behaves as though the thing actually happened.

Movie clip-Galaxy Quest

Brandon (Justin Long):

I understand completely that it's just a TV show.

Jason Nesmith (Tim Allen):

(interrupting) Hold. Wait a minute. Stop. Stop for a second. Stop wait. It's all real.

Brandon:

Oh my God. I knew it. I knew it.

Emily:

Yeah. And it's what brings the love to the movie of Galaxy Quest. It's why people love it so much is that you have the sort of, quote-unquote, heroes of the story are in fact the fans that really buoy up science fiction and the other kinds of fandoms that exist in this sort of genre. I think that's a big part of why it landed as well as it did for the people who went out to go see it.

Musical transition

Matt:

I've heard people who are big Star Trek fans describe this as the best Star Trek film that was ever made. Even though it's not technically a Star Trek film. And I think the reason for that is that unlike the Star Trek films, where the actors in the film have to take their roles very seriously and they have to pretend as though they're dealing with very serious real things, in this case, the film had such an incredible sense of humor and the actors really were able to engage in the, sort of, I don't know, conceit of what that science fiction world actually is rather than live in the science fiction world completely.

Nick:

Yeah, you're right. I've heard it described as the best Star Trek film many times. Often by people who have spent their careers making Star Trek films. Wil Wheaton has notably said, "This is the greatest Star Trek film." And honestly, I think the people that make the movies sometimes rate it higher as a Star Trek film than even the fans themselves. And one thing that I heard was Brent Spiner, who played Data on The Next Generation say, "When I saw the movie, I said, 'Why didn't we do this? Why didn't **we** do this?'" And I think that raises a fair question. And part of it was, "I wanted to be a part of this wonderful project." But also you had to be on the outside in order to be so self-aware. Like, Star Trek couldn't necessarily have done this exact same thing, although there's a lot of DNA of Galaxy Quest in modern Star Trek, filmmakers have acknowledged. But the layers of awareness and the layers of reference goes so deep in Galaxy Quest. And that's really kind of the key to unlocking the entire thing.

Musical transition

Emily:

I think my favorite character is by far the Justin Long character, whose name escapes me, but that's not really the important part. I know Justin Long best from probably one of his least known films, Dodgeball.

Matt:

You think that's an obscure movie?

Nick:

Yeah, I was going to say, if you asked me to name one Justin Long movie...

Emily:

Dodgeball would be the Justin Long movie you named?

Nick:

100 percent.

Emily:

My point being, I think he's my favorite character, because I think that his character is what makes this film a film that people who aren't sci-fi fans can really love and enjoy. Because everybody loves an underdog movie. And while this movie is framed inside of this here's a bunch of actors who played in a Star Trek-like film, and they are the main characters of this movie. But to me, Justin Long's character and his band of super fan friends are the underdog because they're the geeks or nerds, which are usually

society's underdog. They don't get a lot of screen time, but their impact, I think, is the most influential in the movie in terms of getting all the main characters to sort of like, grow, right? That's kind of what you want to see in a movie. You want a big finish and you want that finish to be really satisfying.

Musical transition

Nick:

As we referenced at the top of the show, this movie is rated PG, but it seems to be on the bubble of PG-13 when you're watching it sometimes. And there's a good reason for that. It was originally conceived to be more of an adult action film before Dreamworks decided to reposition it as a family film.

Emily:

I think the perfect illustration of Dreamworks, the production company, trying to kind of make this PG-13 ish movie more of a kids movie was something I didn't know until we watched the documentary *Never Surrender*. Because I saw it when I watched the movie and I was like, "Did I just see what I thought I saw?" So there's this scene where Sigourney Weaver's character is trying to make it through all these chompers, in order to, you know, get to the thing, to do the other stuff, to save the world. And she sits there and out of her mouth is just her lips drop an F bomb, but the sound is PG rated obscenity that I don't remember.

Movie Clip-Galaxy Quest

Gwen DeMarco (Sigourney Weaver):

Well screw that.

**sound of chomping metal*

Emily:

And I remember being like, "Was that something that Amazon cut out or re-edited because they wanted it to be rentable by some other rating?" And it turns out that that was one of those things that just didn't get changed when they tried to aim for the PG rating rather than the PG-13 rating.

Matt:

I had the same reaction when I watched that scene. And I thought maybe HBO Max had done it. And then I thought, "HBO is not taking curse words out of anything."

Emily:

Right?

Matt:

If anything, they're putting it in.

Nick:

I've actually read that the director instructed Sigourney Weaver to deliver the redub badly so that it would be super noticeable because he loved the F-bomb lines so much that when they made him redo it as, "Screw this." Instead of, "F this." He said, like, "Tank the redub so that the audience still gets it." And that's honestly what happened. I remember seeing it in the '90s and thinking that that was funny.

Musical transition

Emily:

I think for me, it was never a perfect sci-fi movie. It was always just a really wonderful adventure movie that was very fun to watch. I think it's not perfect. Especially looking at this film through our lens today in terms of representation of women and Black, Indigenous, people of color. I mean it's just, in the same vein as Star Trek, you have your quintessential token woman and you have your quintessential nonwhite actor in the film. And this movie really follows that guidance pretty strictly.

Nick:

Yeah. Star Trek was very earnest and forthright about trying to cast the future in a way that would speak to the present. And in their era, they did a fairly good job with what they had. We see the flaws and we see the set dressing now, and it did feed into science fiction tropes. And I think Galaxy Quest came in an era where it didn't set off the feelings we now have about those kinds of casting choices. And it was also just barely self-aware enough that it did kind of work in hindsight. It kind of works even now. Likem Sigourney Weaver, having played Ripley in the sci-fi classic Alien, saves Gwen from being kind of a cartoon and enables a little bit more satire and less parody.

And then Tony Shalhoub, who we should say is playing a character that was written as an Asian American, you've got a Lebanese American actor playing the role. And he made the decision, in conjunction with the director, to play his character inspired by David Carradine from Kung Fu. So they decided that since they were like playing with all of these casting choices anyway, and not properly representing the ethnicity of this character, they would lean into it. And he based his performance off of a white guy pretending to be an Asian American in a completely separate show.

Emily:

I think it's interesting how these different science fiction movies appear diverse for the era in which that show was being created, which is, I think, part of the criticism that you can, sort of, lob at Galaxy Quest because Galaxy Quest took what was progressive during the original Star Trek series being filmed and created tokenism. Right? They sort of took something that was progressive in the, we have women on the bridge and we do have a handful of non-white actors. Right, okay. So like we'll call that diverse, right? It's not. But for the day and age, it was. That was really just, sort of, taken, picked up and put into this movie in 1999. And so when we rewatch Galaxy Quest now through our 2020 lens, it just looks like they didn't try at all.

Nick:

Galaxy Quest, like we said, was aware enough that they were able to kinda play with these tropes, but they certainly weren't immune from them. What's the character's name? Hang on, I've got it written down here, Laliari, I think is how you say it. The alien woman. Her role was actually expanded because they realized that Sigourney Weaver was the only prominent woman in the entire cast and entire movie.

So they wanted to add a little bit more diversity there. And what did they have her do, but fall in love with Tony Shalhoub's character. So right, yeah.

Emily:

They want more diversity by making a romance with the other white woman on the screen?

Nick:

Yeah.

Emily:

Yeah. That's a swing and a miss.

Nick:

Yeah, it falls into some of the traps.

Movie Clip-Galaxy Quest

Jason Nesmith (Tim Allan):

Doesn't she talk?

Mathesar (Enrico Colantoni):

Her translator is broken.

Liliari (Missi Pyle):

speaks loud gibberish

Jason Nesmith:

Okie dokie.

Nick:

I think the other direction you could take a love for this movie is the idea that the director Dean Parisot decided that he wanted to do a comedy, but he wanted to do a good drama, good action, good science fiction, and just do it with a comedy bent, instead of trying to make a comedy. So they set out to make a good Star Trek movie that happened to be funny. And that DNA has made it into a lot of stuff, including the modern Star Trek movies have some Galaxy Quest tone to them. But then you also have The Orville, which if you watch that show for 30 seconds, you realize that Seth McFarland, who's the creator and stars in the show, is such a deep Star Trek fan that this is not parody. This is somebody living out the opportunity to be the star of their own Star Trek and trying to do a good job at it. It also happens to kind of be a comedy.

So Guardians of the Galaxy has a lot of the same spirit as Galaxy Quest and a lot of filmmakers, because again, some of the biggest fans of Galaxy Quest, other than the fans themselves that are characters in the movie, are filmmakers themselves because this did come together so well and does

speak to so much truth of working in this industry that everyone seems to love, but also tries to lampoon without puncturing the heart of it.

Matt:

And we should also point out, right, *Galaxy Quest* didn't really invent the science fiction comedy. There were earlier films like *Killer Tomatoes*, *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* or *Morons from Outer Space*.

Nick:

Spaceballs.

Matt:

Spaceballs. There's a whole long tradition of comedy science fiction movies. And there's something about comedy science fiction that just is a formula that works. It's like chocolate and peanut butter. I don't know why it is, but sci-fi and comedy go together really well.

Exit Music up and under

Matt:

AirSpace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. You can follow us on Twitter or Instagram @airspacepod. AirSpace is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart. Mixed by Tarek Fouda. Special thanks to Andrew Fletcher. Distributed by PRX.

Exit music out

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